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Small-Scale Agriculture Today

Office for Small-Scale Agriculture



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U.S. Department of Agriculture - Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
Agricultural Research For A Better Tomorrow

AT ISSUE. . . BOOKISH

On a sultry summer day in 1984, a deluge of mail arrived on my desk. Opening a package I discovered the book *Gaining Ground: The Renewal of America's Small Farms*. I was delighted that someone had written a book focusing on a topic of particular interest to me. Reading the author's name, J. Tevere MacFadyen, I recalled his 1-day visit to my USDA office 2 years earlier. He had come unannounced, and we discussed the current and future status of small farms. I did not perceive that the visit was to obtain material for a book!

More than a decade has passed and America is still in search of a future course for agriculture. It is, therefore, appropriate that the synopsis on the book jacket be shared with readers of *Small-Scale Agriculture Today*. (Howard W. "Bud" Kerr, Jr. USDA-OSSA, Washington, DC 20250)

"This is the story of American farms—from the patchwork hillsides of New England, through the wheat country of the Great Plains, to the factory farms of California's rich Central Valley. For three years Tevere MacFadyen crisscrossed this vast land, talking with farmers—often working alongside the men and women this book describes—to learn what he could about the condition of American agriculture and its probable future.

"He found that the economic miracle of industrial agriculture has just about run its course, leaving both the farmer and the land impoverished. Agricultural indebtedness has tripled in the last ten years, and fifty percent of our farmers are now flirting with bankruptcy. What's more worrisome is the swelling biological deficit. Topsoil erosion is now worse than it was during Dust Bowl days.

"As the author makes plain, there's a battle going on between the proponents of the capital-intensive factory farms and the smaller family farms. Since New Deal days, when agricultural authority first shifted from labor to capital, government policy has favored the bigger players. Today, however, new ingredients are creeping into the battle plan. One example is the Greenmarket movement and the growing public awareness of good food—locally grown leaf lettuces alongside the iceberg. Flexibility in response to changing market conditions is another strength of the diversified small farm. Nonetheless, in the Great Plains both the prairie and the small farm have all but disappeared, displace by the fragile monocultures of wheat, corn, and soybeans. In California, less than ten percent of the farms run to fewer than one thousand acres, and the biggest private factory farmer in the Central Valley lists holdings of a million acres.

"Even though the odds against small-farm survival seem impossibly high, *Gaining Ground* offers some cause for optimism, and it lies with the men and women who are the subject of this absorbing book. The rich cast of independent-thinking pioneers whose stories enliven these pages are a remarkable and diverse lot. What they share is the belief that decentralized, locally responsive, and self-reliant farms can stand up to agribusiness. Equipped with the right tools and working on a small scale, they also believe responsible farmers can eventually restore even the most badly abused land to productivity. As one small-farm advocate puts it, "If the family farm represents anything, it's the intimate and fundamental relationship between people and resources.

"*Gaining Ground* is a richly detailed portrait not simply of farms and farmers but, in a larger sense, of a nation in transition—in search of a future that will be both bountiful and sustainable."

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TOPICS AND TECHNOLOGY

Strawberries and Fish - Strawberry production in the greenhouse using a new hydroponic technique that relies on wastewater from trout production can substantially increase yields. Contact: Fumiomi Takeda, USDA-ARS, Appalachian Fruit Research Laboratory, 45 Wiltshire Road, Kearneysville, WV 25430; telephone: 304-725-3451 Ext 351; fax: 304-728-2340.

Cashmere Goat Manual - Started as a project for the El Paso County 4-H Club, the 53-page reference manual (cost is \$10) is an excellent source for beginners and adults. Contact: 4-H Cashmere Goat Project, c/o Jim Osborn, 3585 Spaatz Road, Monument, CO 80132; telephone: 719-488-8860.

Little Book - *Rebirth of the Small Family Farm* is a 64-page handbook for starting a successful organic farm based on the community-supported agriculture concept. The cost is \$9.95 per copy. Contact: Bob and Bonnie Gregson, IMF Associates, P.O. Box 2542, Vashon Island, WA 98070; telephone: 206-463-9065.

Small vs. Large - According to the Equipment Manufacturers Institute, 1996 tractor sales in the United States are up nearly 7 percent—and the largest increase in sales are in small tractors (under 40 horsepower) and 4-wheel-drive tractors.

Agriculture - "Most of California's rural economy relies on agricultural production, an \$18 billion industry annually. One in ten California residents is employed in agriculture, from farm to market." (*Agricultural Research*, August 1996, p.20).

Pine Straw - Some people in the South are harvesting pine needles for extra cash from sales to landscapers and builders. For more information contact: Catalino A. Blanche, USDA-ARS, South Central Family Farms Research Center, Highway 23 South, Booneville, AR 72927-9214; telephone: 501-675-3834, fax: 501-675-2940.

Money - Do you track and manage your savings bond investments? The 210-page book, *U.S. Savings Bonds: A Comprehensive Guide for Bond Owners and Financial Professionals*, costs \$27.95 and is extremely helpful. Contact: Sara Meriweather, The Savings Bond Informer, Inc., P.O. Box 09249, Detroit, MI 48209; telephone: 313-843-1910; fax: 313-843-1912.

Trees - Good News! "Two new American elms with high levels of tolerance to the fungus that causes Dutch elm disease could restore the American elm to the Main Street USA of earlier days. Over a hundred rooted cuttings of 'Valley Forge' and 'New Harmony' were distributed over the last 2 years to tree

nurseries, experiment stations and arboreta. Wholesale nurseries will propagate the trees for sale by late 1997 or 1998; retail nurseries should have them by 1999." (*Quarterly Report* (USDA-ARS) April to June 1996, p.2)

Holiday Reading - Just in time for Halloween and Christmas:

- *Ghostly Tales of Iowa*, by Ruth Heim and Vickey L. Hinsenbrock, 160 pages, \$18.95.
- *Living With Cows*, by Bob Artley, 96 pages, \$18.95.
- *Country Christmas* (1994), by Bob Artley, 40 pages, \$18.95.

Contact: Beverly Fisher, Iowa State University Press; 2121 South State Avenue, Ames, IA 50014-8300; telephone: 1-800-862-6657.

The Beat Goes On - "Debate over a Commerce Department proposal to change the definition of a farm—farm operations with gross annual sales of \$1,000 and over to those with \$10,000 or more in sales—has been temporarily settled. USDA recently decided to keep the status quo in effect. However, discussion is still going on as to whether that definition is appropriate." (*Farm Bureau News*, July 15, 1996, p.2)

Question - There are approximately how many "squirts" in a gallon of milk? (A) 350 (B) 650 (C) 950. The answer is somewhere in this newsletter.

Veggie Popularity - According to an article in *USA Today*, May 5, 1996, a survey of adults indicated that broccoli is the favorite vegetable of adults (19.7 percent), followed by corn (15.1 percent), beans (11.9 percent), carrots (10.0 percent), and potatoes (8.8 percent).

Winterizing - Freezing and thawing causes the soil to heave, pushing shallow-rooted plants like strawberries out of the ground, exposing roots and crown. To eliminate this problem, mulch the crop with straw after the ground freezes.

Never, Never - When removing poison ivy, never burn it. The smoke can carry the toxic oils and cause sensitive people downwind a lot of anguish.

Compelling - Victor Davis Hanson, author of *Fields Without Dreams*, is a scholar. However, more importantly, he is a 5th-generation vine and fruit grower defending the agrarian idea. The 289-page book costs \$23 plus shipping and tax. Contact: Simon & Shuster Order Department, 200 Old Tappan Road, Old Tappan, NJ 07675; telephone: 1-800-223-2336.

Recalling - "In the past 50 years, our society has migrated from family farms and rural communities. We have become a culture of refugees from the land, and for many the taste of summer tomatoes is all that's left of a living memory." (*National Gardening*, July/August '96, p.20)

However. . . - "According to a study coauthored by Calvin Beale, USDA's longtime rural demographer, the country's non-metro communities gained 1.25 million residents in the years 1990 to 1995." (*Progress Farmer*, August 1996, p.9)

Numbers - There are 2.06 million farms in the Nation today—a drop of less than 1 percent from 1995.

Ups and Downs - The five States with the largest decrease in farm numbers are Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, and Ohio. The largest farmland increase occurred in Louisiana.

Five-to-One - There are five farms with sales of less than \$100,000 for each farm having sales of more than \$100,000, according to a Census Bureau Report.

Herb Information - Two books that are helpful for beginners and veterans in the business of growing and enjoying herbs:

- *The Herb Gardener: A Guide for all Seasons*, 236 pages, 32.90 (hardcover)
- *Herb Mixtures & Spicy Blends*, 156 pages, \$17.95 (paperback) \$19.95 (hardcover)

Contact: Storey Communications, P.O. Box 445, Pownell, VT 05261-9988; telephone: 1-800- 441-5700.

Chores - "As long as the grass shows growth it should be cut back, because a lawn left long invites a bacterial infection in winter just as the unmowed orchard provides sanctuary to rodents which chew upon bark and roots" (*Rural New England Magazine*, October 1991, p.4)

In Print - American Small Farm's Fourth Annual Source Book provides resource information, product listings and product providers. The cost is \$5. Contact: *American Small Farms Magazine*, 21882 Sherman Way, Suite 200, Canoga Park, CA 91303; telephone: 818-716-3131; fax: 818-716-3171.

Answer - (A) 350 "squirts" in 1 gallon. And, by the way--the average cow produces 5 to 6 gallons of milk each day. Thank goodness for milking machines!

Do It - Now is the time to plant cover crops such as winter rye, hairy vetch, alfalfa, or buckwheat.

Observed - Some crops this past growing season, e.g., apple, cucumbers, and melons, were misshapen due to poor pollination because of the lack of honeybees.

One More Time - Turn the compost pile before cold weather sets in.

Also - With cold weather coming, be sure to move liquid materials that may freeze to an area that does not freeze.

Heading South? - Three books about Florida gardens and landscape may help you ease the transition:

- *Florida Gardening: The Newcomer's Survival Manual*, 87 pages, \$11.
- *A Cutting Garden for Florida*, 96 pages, \$10.
- *Herbs and Spices for Florida Gardens*, 250 pages, \$16.

Contact: Betty Mackey, B. B. Mackey Books, P.O. Box 475, Wayne, PA 19087-0475; telephone 610-971-9409.

Growing - Cash receipts from the greenhouse and nursery industry increased 80 percent from 1984 to 1993. Those sales were almost \$26 billion in 1994.

Oh Deer—More - "Monofilament fishing line (heavy), with 6-8 strands spaced vertically, supposedly repels deer grazing. Even one line at 2-3 feet supposedly provides some protection. They can't see it and are surprised when they run into it." (*Green Mountain Grower* - Issue 171, Summer 1996, p.71).

F.Y.I. - Interesting videos for your kids and grandparents:

- *Tractors, Cotton Pickers, and Stuff Kids Wear*, 30 minutes; costs \$23.90. Checks payable to: Just Our Size Videos.

Contact: Patty Schindler, 14010 Falls Road, Cockeysville, MD 21030; telephone: 410-584-7053 or 1-800-808-3276.

- *Skills for Kids Nature Art from Herbs, Flowers and Trees*, 60 minutes; costs 19.95.
- *Little Medicine: The Wisdom to Avoid Big Medicine*, 60 minutes, costs \$19.95.

Contact: Jim Meuninck, Media Methods, 24047 North Shore Drive, Edwardsbourg, MI 49112; telephone/ fax: 616-699-7061.

- *Vegetable Farmers and Their Weed Control Machines*, 75 minutes; costs \$10.00. Contact: University of Vermont Extension, Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 590 Main Street, Burlington, VT 05405-0059; telephone: 802-656-0037; fax: 802-656-8874.
- *Beekeeping in Northern Climates* (includes 68-page manual), 40 minutes; costs \$45. Ask for item EP-6684 and contact: Minnesota Extension Service Distribution Center, 20 Coffey Hall, 1420 Eckles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108-6069; telephone: 1-800-876-8636.

Growing - Worldwide demand for sunflower oil and seeds is gaining at about 3 percent a year.

Herbaceous Perennials - The Professional Plant Growers Association (PPGA) has developed the *Professional Guide to Herbaceous Perennials*, a 28-page, full color booklet that costs \$2.60. Contact: Dana Taggart PPGA, P.O. Box 27517, Lansing, MI 48909-0517; telephone: 1-800- 647-7742.

Coming - Reserve your 1997 copy of the Scented Geranium Reference Guide and Catalog for \$5. Contact: Mary Peddie, Rutland of Kentucky, P.O. Box 182, Washington, KY 41096; telephone: 606-759-7815; fax: 606-759-5745.

THIS FALL

Many tasks can be accomplished that will make your 1997 spring garden burst with color. For example:

- plant spring-flowering bulbs
- re-seed or establish a new lawn
- plant perennial plants
- plant ornamental and fruit trees
- plant shrubs
- even some cold-tolerant annual flowers can be planted to be in place for the first rays of spring 1997!

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

October 5-6, 1996 - Denver Alternative Livestock Seminar, Denver Trade Center - Holiday Inn. Contact: Bill Lowe, 1611 Park Avenue, Canon City, CO 81212; telephone: 719-275-0296, 719- 275-8650.

October 5-6, 1996 - The World's Largest Gourd Show, Morrow County Fair Grounds, Mt. Gilead, OH. Contact: Jean McClintonck, The American Gourd Society, Inc., P.O. Box 274, Mt. Gilead, OH 43338-0724; telephone/fax: 419-362-6446.

October 21-23, 1996 - New England Greenhouse Conference, Sturbridge Host Hotel, Sturbridge, Massachusetts. Contact: Richard J. Shaw, Department of Plant Sciences, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881; telephone: 401-874-5996.

October 30-31, 1996 - North Carolina Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Annual Meeting, Stanly County Agri-Civic Center, Albemarle, NC. Contact: Sarah Slover, NCGVGA, P.O. Box 7609, NCSU, Raleigh, NC 27695; telephone: 919-515-1221.

November 1-2, 1996 - 1996 Small Farm Trade Show & Seminars, Midway Exposition Center, Columbia, Missouri. Contact: Chuck DeCourley, 3903 West Ridge Trail Road, Clark, MO 65243; telephone: 1-800-633-2535; fax: 573-687-3048.

November 11 & 12, 1996 - Hydroponic Seminar "Vertical Growing Systems", Tampa, FL. Contact: Hydro-Gardens, Inc., P.O. Box 25845, Colorado Springs, CO 80936; telephone: 1-800- 634-6367.

November 13 - 15, 1996 - The Composting Council's Seventh Annual Conference "Mapping the Future," Sheraton National Hotel, Arlington, VA. Contact: Rebecca Roe, The Composting Council, 1214 South Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314; telephone: 703-739-2401; fax: 703-739- 2407.

November 14-15, 1996 -1996 Southeastern Strawberry Expo, Sheraton Imperial Hotel, Research Triangle Park, NC. Contact: Sarah Slover, N.C. Strawberry Association, Box 7609, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695; telephone: 919-515-1221.

November 15-18, 1996 - Stockman Grass Farmers (SGF) North American Grazing Conference, the Harvey Hotel, Dallas, TX. Contact: Diane Dickens SGF, P.O. Box 9607, Jackson, MS 39286-9607; telephone: 1-800-748-9808, fax: 601-981-8558.

November 18, 1996 - Appalachian Small Business Expo, Regional Trade Show & Business Development Workshops, Charleston Civic Center, Charleston, WV, Contact: Ivy Wallace, Center for Economic Options, 601 Delaware Avenue, Charleston, WV 25302; telephone: 304- 345-1298.

November 21-23, 1996 - Georgia Vegetable and Small Fruit Conference and Trade Show (including the 8th Biennial Southeast Blueberry Conference and Trade Show), The University of Georgia Rural Development Center, Tifton, GA. Contact: Conference Office, Rural Development Center, P.O. Box 1209, Tifton, GA 31793; telephone: 912-386-3416; fax: 912-386-3822.

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